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SUBJECT: LOWER HOUSE PLENARY SESSION TRIES TO FOCUS ON  
DEVELOPMENT OF COLOMBIA'S SMALLEST DEPARTMENT

11. (SBU) Summary: The House of Representatives held an historic plenary session September 7-8 on the island of San Andres, the capital of Colombia's smallest Department, San Andres and Providencia. Despite impassioned and nationalistic statements about Nicaraguan incursions into Colombian territorial waters delivered by many of the 61 members of Congress who attended the session, the biggest challenge for the department is development. End Summary.

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Special Congressional Session Focuses on  
San Andres and Providencia  
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12. (U) Poloff accompanied 61 members of Congress (technically a quorum for formal deliberations) to San Andres, the largest of Colombia's islands in the Western Caribbean and the capital of Colombia's smallest Department, San Andres and Providencia, September 7-8 for the first-ever session of the House held outside of Bogota. The session was convened by Speaker Julio Gallardo Archbold (Conservative), a native of San Andres, to focus attention on local and territorial issues. Prior to the session, Gallardo posed a series of written questions to various Ministers, including Treasury, Finance, Agriculture, Social Protection, and Energy. Only Finance Minister Alberto Carrasquilla attended. The others sent representatives, which Gallardo noted in his opening remarks.

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Some Progress Made on Development, More Needed  
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13. (U) Ministry representatives reported on progress on various development projects required by Law 915 of 2004. (Note: The law mandates economic and social development initiatives for the islands. End Note.) This included increased air service from the mainland, including a new flight to the island of Providencia, as well as the expected completion of the Department's first large hospital in January 2007. The representative from the Ministry of Public Services announced an investment of more than 24 billion pesos (roughly USD 11 billion) in new water and sewer systems.

14. (U) Because San Andres and Providencia have been duty free ports since 1953, trade and economic issues took center stage. Gallardo criticized the GOC for failing to consider the impact of trade policy decisions on San Andres and Providencia. He was particularly concerned that recent GOC actions limiting Chinese imports conflicted with the Department's duty free status. Other economic discussions focused on investment in agriculture, traditional fishing and education. The Agriculture Ministry representative had little positive to report. Similarly, the Education Ministry representative noted that investment in bilingual education on the islands, required by law, was being hampered by a lack of appropriate curriculum and qualified teachers.

15. (SBU) After a tour of the island on September 8, many members of Congress noted the poor condition of most housing and disrepair of the roads. Governor Susanie Davis Bryan, among other local officials, criticized the inattention of the GOC. Unemployment is high and tourism, which provides most jobs and investment, has declined in recent years. Investment in other employment-producing sectors, especially fishing, has been minimal, they said. Many locals noted their isolation from traditional Colombian culture given their Anglo-African roots.

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Complaints Over Alleged Nicaraguan Territorial Incursions  
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16. (SBU) During the special session, Gallardo and others made forceful statements regarding Colombian sovereignty over the Department, which includes the islands of San Andres, Providencia and Santa Catalina, as well as several smaller, uninhabited islands, during the nearly seven hours of live televised coverage. Both President Gallardo and Congressman Juan Hurtado (a fellow Conservative) made impassioned speeches noting that "San Andres and Providencia are part of Colombia!" (Note: An International Court of Justice decision in late 2004 found that the islands were part of Colombia,

consistent with the Barcenas-Esquerria Treaty, signed by both countries in 1928 and ratified in 1930. As a consequence of this decision, and the application of several provisions of the Convention on the Law of the Sea, Nicaragua's exclusive economic zone is, in some places, limited to only 55 nautical miles from its coast instead of the standard 200 miles. End Note.) According to Gallardo and other members of Congress, frequent incursions by Nicaraguan fishermen into Colombian waters continue.

DRUCKER